

STATE OF CONNECTICUT DISEASE FACT SHEET

E. coli O157:H7

What is *E. coli* O157:H7?

E. coli is a bacterium. Most strains of the bacteria are harmless, but one particular strain, *E. coli* O157:H7, is known to produce a toxin and can cause illness.

Where are *E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria found?

E. coli O157:H7 bacteria normally lives in the intestines of humans and animals.

How is this bacteria spread?

E. coli O157:H7 has been found in raw hamburger and ground beef. The bacteria live in the intestines of some cattle, and contamination of the meat may occur as a normal part of the slaughtering process. Ingestion of contaminated meat can cause illness.

E. coli O157:H7 is also present in the stool of infected persons. Hands may be contaminated if they are not thoroughly washed with soap and water after toilet visits, and bacteria may be passed from one person to another. This type of spread is particularly likely in young children

Who gets *E. coli* O157:H7 infection?

Anyone who eats contaminated rare or inadequately cooked meat may then develop symptoms. The bacteria is killed when the meat is thoroughly cooked and there is no risk of illness. The bacteria may be present in dairy cows, and drinking raw (unpasteurized) milk or eating products made from raw milk may also cause infection.

What are the symptoms of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection?

People who are infected with this bacterium often develop severe diarrhea with abdominal cramps several days later. Blood is often seen in the stool. Fever is usually low-grade or absent. Symptoms usually resolve over several days.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear from 3 to 8 days after consumption of the bacterium, usually 3 or 4 days.

How long can an infected person carry *E. coli* O157:H7?

Adults can carry this bacterium for 1 week while one third of children can carry it up to 3 weeks.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

Young children known to have *E. coli* O157:H7 infection should be isolated from contact with other children or elderly individuals until two stool cultures (obtained at least 24 hours apart) have tested negative for the bacterium. School-age children who have recovered from their illness may attend school as long as the child demonstrates good

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E. coli O157:H7 (cont.)

hygiene, since spread in the school setting is much less likely than spread in the day care setting.

What is the treatment for *E. coli* O157:H7 infection?

There is no evidence that antibiotic treatment is helpful. Diarrhea caused by *E. coli* O157:H7 usually resolves over a few days without any specific treatment.

Antidiarrheal agents are also not recommended. As with all types of diarrhea, it is important to avoid dehydration by drinking plenty of fluids.

How can *E. coli* O157:H7 infection be prevented?

1. Since hamburger and ground beef may be contaminated with this bacterium, thorough cooking is essential to prevent illness. The inside of the hamburger should be brown rather than pink and should never be served rare.
2. After working with raw meats it is important to clean the food preparation area to help stop the transmission of *E. coli* O157:H7.
3. Thoroughly wash all fresh vegetables and fruits before eating them.
4. Good hygiene and handwashing with warm, soapy water are the best defense against person-to-person spread.